

# Costing the taxpayer

A short story by  
Jennifer Lehmann

I didn't write this story. It would be impossible for me to put the words and sentences together. But it is my story just the same — or at least it is *one* of my stories. It's one of my angry ones and I hope my mum (she's not my *real* mum) has made it sound like me. What she read out to me when we'd finished sounded like it was my story, but then again she may not have really written those words. It's hard for me to tell because my reading is not so good, though she did write 'fuck' when I told her to. That's one word I *do* know.

My name is Melissa Raymond, but most people call me Melissa Williams. It's easier that way, although anyone who works for the government says it has to be Raymond. I always feel surprised when they call out my name. You wait and wait in those reception areas with people pretending other people aren't there. Then the door into the secure area opens and it's 'Melissa Raymond? Ms Williams? Would you like to come through now? We're ready to start.' And it's always much later than the time they said to come. Mum and I learnt long ago to put an extra hour on the parking meter.

I noticed that people who work for the government always have files full of papers about you. Mine are really fat. There was one at the school that I left a couple of years back, one at the foster care agency, one at the welfare office and soon there'll be one at Centrelink. I haven't seen the one at TAFE, but it's probably much the same. I think they need them for their planning meetings so they don't forget who you are or get you mixed up with other kids. Once a social worker told me I might need information from my file one day — the file she was looking after — but I never have. It's all stuff that other people write about you and only bits of it are really me. Like the photos in the brown envelope taken when I was about eight years old. I had copies once, but they got lost in a move. If I ask for more it'll cost the taxpayer. And that's what my angry story is about. Being a cost to the taxpayer.

It all started when I was on the bus. I was going home. Well, I was going back to Josie Williams' place after visiting my crazy mother who lives about five hours away. My mother keeps telling me my real home is with her, and she says that even when she's not being crazy. Josie says I'm welcome to call her place home if I want, so you can see how even saying 'I'm going home' can have its problems.

So I was sitting on the bus and it was crowded up with people and no one talked to me because I look way out. And that's how I like it most of the time. Nothing like a few

studs, a do-it-yourself hair cut and a lolly pink jacket from the Op Shop to hold people back. And then there was a stop in one town and people got on and off and, when we started up again, there were different people next to me and sitting opposite as well. It didn't worry me except that they started talking and they made out that I was included.

You know the sort of stuff. First of all a smile at me when someone said something funny. Then a short pause to see if I wanted to make a comment too. A while later one of them asked me a question and I was offered a toffee when a packet got passed around. No way was I going to say anything — well, not much anyway. But I was listening all right.

They were telling each other about why they came to be on the bus and that led to swapping bits of their life histories. Then the girl who was not much older than me said she was at university. 'Fuck!' I thought to myself, 'She must be a real smart arse.' It turned out she *was* smart. I could tell she knew about heaps of things; things I'd never heard of. She said her mum had always looked after her and bought her books and taken her to different places. She had won money from the government to help with her university fees and then she had got a full time, government scholarship to pay for more study because she'd done so well. It sounded like heaps of money to me. And she was allowed to live at home and had her own rooms in the house as well as being able to go overseas on holidays.

It was that girl who made me angry. Not that it was her fault really. I've always been angry. But it was thinking about how the government gives money to people my age who already have things and can do things when they make such a big deal of giving me money for things I really need.

'You're independent now,' my fifth social worker from the welfare told me when I turned sixteen. 'You can move out of Josie's place if you want. In fact Josie isn't eligible for foster payments any more, so you should really pay board if you stay with her.' *What?* Leave Josie's because no one would pay for me to stay? Suddenly? Just like that? I remember wondering where on earth I would go if I couldn't stay with Josie. For the next couple of weeks I was trying so hard to be so good. I wanted her to want me to stay. The pressure was just too much for us both. We cracked, but luckily Josie knew what was going on and kept talking to me about it even when I wasn't listening.

The foster care people came too. Lots of concern about the cost of caring for me. Telling me it wasn't fair on Josie to have to keep me for nothing. Lots of talk about how they might have to try for some special funding. It wasn't that they wanted me to leave, although they did mention that there were other young people who needed placements too. But they said I had to pull my weight; staying there was now a privilege rather than a right. It was Josie's home. They didn't have to support me and Josie any more, though they said they would help if they could for a bit longer. I noticed they didn't say anything about how I was so far behind in reading and writing. There were no more long conversations about my emotional attachments and the impacts of my disrupted life.

So there I was at sixteen with only my clothes, my walkman, some CDs, a few school books and my backpack. Oh, and I had about \$169 in a bank account that Josie had set up for me. If I went to TAFE for catch-up classes I had to see Centrelink about Austudy and there were regular forms to complete. If I went on the dole I had to do a job preparation program and there were more forms to complete. If I went for jobs, I needed new clothes and copies of a CV. The clothes were less of a problem than the CV, of course. Or I could go to my mother. Never mind that we hadn't lived together for more than three or four days at a time for about ten years, and that she's in and out of treatment like blowies through an open window.

It was pretty difficult to decide what to do because I didn't know if TAFE or the dole would be best. I didn't know what

the classes would be like. But I knew if it was like school I probably wouldn't cope too well. Going to my real mum was not an option.

So you're wondering what happened? Josie just said 'stay'. Then she said we'd try one thing at a time and check it out. And she paid whenever the taxpayer wouldn't and there were lots of times when the government payments went wrong, or stopped, or had to be changed. And there were delays — always delays. Some nights it was eggs and baked beans and Josie would laugh and say 'Tonight you're not costing the taxpayer.' But I still worry about how I will ever get to be independent and I get scared when I think about it. Actually, I'm not sure that I really want to be independent. And I often wonder if that girl on the bus thought about being independent and if getting all that government money made the difference for her. ■

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*An article written by Dr Lehmann in Children Australia Vol 28, No 1, 'Practice-based stories: Tools for teaching and learning', explores this topic further.*

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